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ON HER OWN TERMS:
REFLECTIONS ON THE CAREER OF SANDRA THOMSON

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ON HER OWN TERMS: REFLECTIONS ON THE CAREER OF SANDRA THOMSON

Dorothee Pauli

Sandra Thomson is an Ōtautahi Christchurch-based painter, printmaker, graphic artist and qualified sociologist. Over the last 40 years, she has maintained a consistent national and international exhibition record, using her dual skill set and well-honed powers of observation to critically examine the patriarchal structure of Western societies and how individual identities are shaped by discourses of power and resistance. She has long been fascinated by the human need to establish and adhere to spiritual belief systems, and our pre-occupation with variously imagined end-of-world scenarios. Most recently, she turned her attention to specific aspects of Western science, namely the preservation and genetic manipulation of animal DNA. She has dealt with these themes in long thematic cycles, which over the course of her career grew more pessimistic in tone. This is not surprising, given that Thomson consistently leans into the more destructive aspect of human agency and the psychological, social and environmental vulnerabilities it creates. But a tangible sense of despair is often balanced by a near gleeful appreciation of the more absurd aspects of our existence, captured in a distinctive style that relies in equal measure on observational accuracy and expressive distortion. This article, mostly based on conversations with the artist, provides a brief and largely chronological survey of her career and aims to encourage a more detailed engagement with Thomson's ongoing contribution to printmaking and drawing in Aotearoa New Zealand. To begin that discussion, the opening paragraphs are dedicated to her most recent exhibitions, which exemplify Thomson's sequential mode of addressing complex and challenging subject matter.

Uncertainty (2025), Thomson's latest show at the City Art Depot gallery in Christchurch, provides a logical conclusion to a theme first explored in *Interference* (2019) and *Banking* (2022). All three of these substantial collections of drawings, as well as the countless studies that preceded the final works, highlight how deeply she engages with the social phenomena she is interested in. More specifically, they represent Thomson's way of processing the ethical ambiguities and long-term impact of species conservation, extinction cycles and resurrection genetics.¹ *Interference* addressed our dysfunctional relationship with primates, humankind's closest living relatives on the planet. In a series of drawings best described as psychological portraits, Thomson attempted to capture the inner life and agency of the great apes, who find themselves monitored, displaced, orphaned, raised in captivity or domesticated as pets. She was inspired in part by the themes raised in Karen Joy Fowler's best-selling novel *We are all completely besides ourselves* (2013), about a child who grows up believing a chimpanzee to be her sister, as a result of an experiment by her psychologist father.² In Thomson's images, the subjects do not turn away. They hold and return the gaze of the viewer and assert themselves as powerless, but not passive receivers of the human interferences in their lives.

Banking focused on our well-intentioned but often misguided efforts to save the very species that we have pushed to the edge of extinction, through the preservation, or banking, of genetic materials. The show confronted her audience with a set of surreal and unsettling depictions of complete animals in a state of cryopreservation, and of animal parts such as a hoof, ear, head or tail. Collectively, they encouraged a secondary reading of the exhibition as a contemplation of patriarchal power structures that extend to our dealings with non-human lifeforms and the ethical dilemmas posed by scientific practices that attempt to mitigate that fact.



Figure 1. Sandra Thomson, *Saved but Changed 2*, 2018 (watercolour and chalk pencil, 766x562mm), (From the exhibition *Interference*, 2019, City Art Depot, Christchurch).



Figure 2. Sandra Thomson, *Shrinking Habitat*, 2018 (watercolour and chalk pencil, 1197x842mm), (From the exhibition *Interference*, 2019, City Art Depot, Christchurch).



Figure 3. Sandra Thomson, *Depository 4*, 2022, (watercolour and chalk, 420x297mm), (From the exhibition *Banking*, 2022, City Art Depot, Christchurch).



Figure 4. Sandra Thomson, *Depository 13*, 2022, (watercolour and chalk, 420x297mm), (From the exhibition *Banking*, 2022, City Art Depot, Christchurch).

Uncertainty (2025) addressed the next step in that cycle by illustrating in Thompson's fluid and vigorous drawing style the wider consequences of the possible resurrection of lost species. The show consisted of a sequence of somewhat distorted but plausible and engaging portraits of fictitious animals brought back from extinction with the help of closely related surviving host species. *Uncertainty*, in many ways a meditation on conflicting concepts of conservation, was all the more topical as it coincided with the news of the partial recreation of the dire wolf by Colossal Biosciences, co-founded by controversial Harvard geneticist George Church.³ Thomson also referred to plans for the resurrection of the Tasmanian tiger (or thylacine), the dodo, the woolly mammoth and the passenger Pigeon,⁴ as well as the ongoing debate about the authenticity of a species brought back into existence in this way. The exhibition pointed to questions about viable habitats for the resurrected creatures, how humans will interact with them and the price that the initial host species may have to pay when forced to participate in de-extinction projects. Thomson's collection of surreal yet vulnerable creatures was clearly inspired by her interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), but also by legitimate questions about who is 'saved' first when we play God – animals that humans consider to be cute and appealing, or the less handsome ones?⁵

Overall, then, *Uncertainty* was a befitting and stylistically cohesive finale to Thomson's engagement with recent chapters of natural history. As was the case with *Interference* and *Banking*, her attention to detail references the work of pioneering eighteenth and nineteenth century illustrators of exotic fauna and flora, but without their sense of enthusiasm for the ideological positions and notions of progress embodied by Western science. In line with Thomson's dual training, it was arguably the human species that was the most closely observed subject of all three shows. When seen in the context of human exceptionalism, the works reminded us why our control over and relationship with all the earth's creatures is faltering. So far, neither our scientific insights into climate change and extinction cycles, nor the moral obligations we may feel towards vulnerable species, have persuaded us to behave in accordance with humankind's place in the planet's environmental and spiritual eco-systems.



Figure 5. Sandra Thomson, *Uncertainty 1*, 2025, (watercolour and chalk pencil, 565x385mm, (From the exhibition *Banking*, 2022, City Art Depot, Christchurch).

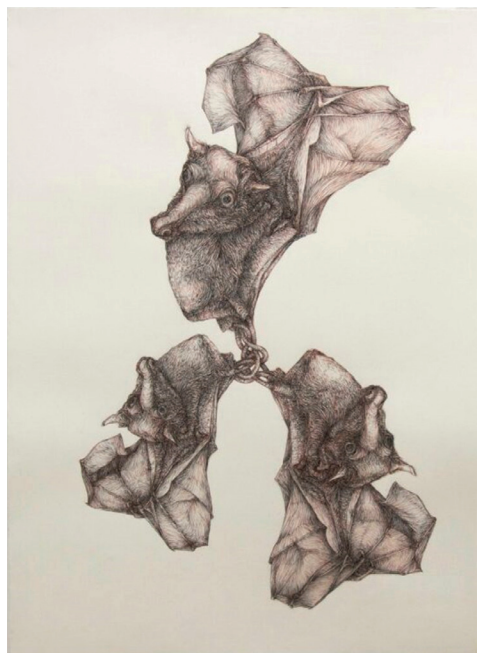


Figure 6. Sandra Thomson, *Uncertainty 14*, 2025, (watercolour and chalk pencil, 770x565mm, (From the exhibition *Banking*, 2022, City Art Depot, Christchurch).

Thomson's engagement with some of the more problematic aspects of scientific endeavour and the eugenic temptations offered by technology relate to her thoughts on another evolutionary process, which in future may impact profoundly on what it means to be human. The advances made in the development of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) relate directly to Thomson's interest in the sociological functions of art in a variety of historical contexts. She is well aware that the evolution of GenAI may challenge sociologist Howard Becker's argument that "the social systems which produce art survive in all sorts of ways, though never exactly as they have in the past."⁶ The digital revolution has impacted on the social structures Becker is referring to in ways he could not have foreseen in the 1980s, as much as they have changed the teaching, production and consumption of art itself. Some fear that GenAI could spell the end of art or human creativity altogether. If creativity is defined as the ability to generate ideas that are new, valuable and surprising,⁷ then it can be argued that machines by now have pulled up alongside their human counterparts. That said, similar debates followed the emergence of photography in the nineteenth century and the appearance of Marcel Duchamp's disruptive ready-mades in the early twentieth century.⁸ Neither development resulted in the death of art.

It remains to be seen what philosophical, legal and economic implications GenAI will have for any future art world, but Thomson freely admits that she remains unaffected by the ongoing speculative discussions on that topic, and that as a late-career artist she is free to make that choice. She is not tempted to explore digital technology as an iterative tool linked to linguistic prompts. For her, creativity is about the flow, about being in the moment, letting the materiality of analogue media guide her process and the decision-making about when something is right, or as right as it can be.⁹ As she approaches the final chapters of her career, some might suggest that her work could even be studied as a historical model of what it means or once meant to be a professional artist. It is traditional in technique and maintains an understanding of art as a profoundly intellectual and physical activity, associated with critical thinking, technical skill, observational exactitude, consistent effort and inventiveness. More specifically, her work confirms that it is the creative human mind that searches for and reflects on the "causal relationships between different actors in the world."¹⁰ That timeless quality could be seen as a leitmotif of Thomson's entire creative output thus far.

In many ways, Thomson's career confirms Becker's statement that the production of art is closely aligned with the social structures that produce it, and in that sense she followed the most obvious and reliable path to artistic professionalism twentieth century Aotearoa New Zealand could offer. She developed her practice well before the digital revolution and could consider the impact of the industrial revolution on Western modes of art with the benefit of hindsight. Her training more or less followed the expected route of tertiary study, but from the beginning she sought to accommodate both her interest in the social sciences as well as the fine arts. At the University of Canterbury she completed a BA in Sociology in 1974 and a BFA in 1981.¹¹ At Ilam, her tutors were Don Peebles, Doris Lusk, Laurence Aberhart and Barry Cleavin. It was a lecture given by Cleavin that persuaded Thomson to switch from painting to printmaking as her major focus. Drypoint etching and woodcut were her preferred media; she enjoyed the physicality of the carving process involved. Lithography was not well supported at the school and therefore did not feature prominently in her later work. From Cleavin especially she inherited a commitment to technical excellence and compositional exactitude, a quality she later also looked for in her own students' work.¹²

At Ilam, she Thomson formed her first and arguably most significant professional networks, confirming the collaborative nature of art making and the importance of an ongoing exchange of ideas.¹³ She was, and still is, especially close to Nicola Jackson and her partner Stuart Griffiths, but was also friends with Lorraine Webb, Karen Mason and Jill McIntosh. Even though younger New Zealand artists at the time were beginning to look closer to home for inspiration, in terms of the style and the content their work, Thomson, like many of her friends, remained committed to using European traditions as the yardstick to measure her own efforts. Expressionism, particularly German Expressionism, was her guide. She still admires the work of Max Beckmann, Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner and Käthe Kollwitz, but also the more lyrical paintings and pastels of Marc Chagall. More recently she studied the drawings of Paula Rego, inspired by Rego's productivity and the daring scale of much of her work. Nicola Hicks, Sarah Simblet and William Kentridge are other contemporary influences, while closer to home she looks to the work of not only Jackson but Kristin Hollis, Kushana Bush and Robin White.

In line with these expanding influences, coupled with her reading of broader social developments, Thomson's style and choice of media evolved continuously, with drawing remaining the one constant in her practice. Early work, such as *The Ridgeway Flyers* (1981, etching, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū), with its compositional exactitude and technical control, clearly demonstrates the formative influence of Cleavin and a choice of subject matter as yet untroubled by the ideological shifts of the later twentieth century. That changed as she turned her attention to the broader goals and concepts of post-modernism. The immediacy of conceptual and performance art, as well as pop art and the Women's Art Movement (WAM), proved especially appealing for younger New Zealand artists at the time and like most of her contemporaries Thomson was familiar with key WAM projects such as Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974–1979). Moreover, as previously noted, Thomson emerged from art school in 1981, a watershed year in the history of New Zealand because of the culture war ignited by the Springbok Tour. Already an Anti-Vietnam war protester as a high-school student, Thomson was a HART member before the tour and very active on the barricades during the event itself. For her, the tour shattered the illusion of national unity and heightened her awareness of the polarised and patriarchal nature of New Zealand society.¹⁴



Figure 7. Sandra Thomson, *Neglected Women Drown 2/20*, 1988, (woodcut, 815x565mm), Collection of the Ara Institute of Canterbury, Christchurch.



Figure 8. Sandra Thomson, *Neglected Women Jump 4/20*, 1988, (woodcut, 770x590mm), Collection of the Ara Institute of Canterbury, Christchurch.

Arguably, the open debates about cultural identity and social justice of the late 1970s and 1980s further encouraged Thomson to do “her own thing”¹⁵ and to use her work to respond to contemporary socio-political debates that affected her directly and to her study of feminist theory. The *Neglected Women* series of woodcuts (1988) was a direct response to an article Thomson had read a Hong Kong newspaper reporting on the suicides committed by women desperate to escape the social and cultural isolation imposed on them in a deeply patriarchal society.¹⁶ In these deceptively colourful works, groups of women can be seen jumping from high buildings or drowning themselves in dark rivers. They mark the appearance of a style that Cassandra Fusco later described as “agonistic, funky-edged and rarely ‘soft’.”¹⁷ Their appeal is at first satirical, and the serious, if not tragic, message of these vigorously carved woodcuts only reveals itself at a second or third glance. This is entirely appropriate to the marginalised position the women found themselves in and the invisible psychological damage they suffered as a consequence. Women, or more precisely the limitations imposed on women through shifting modes of gender

construction, continued to inspire subsequent prints and print cycles, such as *The Levitator* (1990, lithograph, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa) and *If the Shoe Fits* (1995, woodcut, Ara Institute of Canterbury). The latter, depicting crippled toes completing a tortuously high-heeled shoe, points to Thomson's decade-long investigation of "some of the manufactured extremes that shape, reshape, define and redefine not only the human body, but also the wider power structure in society."¹⁸

The question of gender construction resurfaced in a series of works addressing some of the themes she encountered while travelling to Mexico and later Spain, both countries which in Thomson's opinion are very unlike secular New Zealand. Her time in these deeply religious countries inspired a long thematic cycle addressing Catholic phenomena such as relics and saints, the cloak of Guadeloupe and forgeries of the shroud of Turin. Female saints and what constitutes appropriate conduct in women, as postulated by a religious patriarchy, took centre stage in *Saintly Behaviour* (2001). With works such as *St Agatha* (2001, woodblock), Thomson pointed to the extreme self-abnegation and humility women had to demonstrate before they could be considered worthy of sainthood. In response to these bodies of work Cassandra Fusco pointed out that:

Sandra Thomson makes no claim to universal truths. But she squarely rejects and endeavours to deconstruct what she sees as the 'death dealing' binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity – past and present. Thomson's work explores subjectivity and the forces shaping it – cultural, social and political. This recent series builds upon earlier investigations wherein authoritarian and manipulative pressures are exposed as limiting women's perspectives, enticing them to aspire to impossible positions.¹⁹

Thomson concluded her engagement with the construction of female identity according to Catholic dogma with *Relics* (2004). The latter included a series of works in the shape and size of nuns' collars, featuring symbols such as tightly wound rosebuds to signify the sexual repression of that self-declared bride of Christ, while grid-based overlays resembling a tight mesh can be read as markers of voluntary incarceration.²⁰

Thomson's sustained critique of patriarchal power structures and their impact on the lives of women was not lost on Pamela Gerrish-Nunn, formerly a lecturer at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts. *Cutting a Dash* (2007), held at the SoFA gallery (then located at the Christchurch Arts Centre) and curated by Gerrish-Nunn, was



Figure 9. Sandra Thomson, *Underwear for Amazons*, 1996 (woodcut, 480x620mm), From the exhibition *Supporting Roles*, 1997, CoCA, Christchurch. (Private collection, Christchurch).



Figure 10. Sandra Thomson, *Collar for a Bride of Christ*, 2004, (screenprint on fabric, 550x520mm approx.), From the exhibition *Relics*, 2004, CoCA, Christchurch, (Private collection, Christchurch)

the first and, so far, only retrospective of Thomson's work. A feminist art historian, Gerrish-Nunn could identify with many of the underlying messages in Thomson's work, which also included the satirical trawl through the history of fashion. Included in the retrospective was *Underwear for Amazons* (1996, woodcut), featuring a selection of corsets and other such shapewear on mannequin stands. They refer not only to the changing beauty standards applied to the female form, but also to how individuals can be persuaded to squeeze into modes of performing gender in ways that are not of their own choosing. At the time, Thomson pointed out that some women chose to wear corset-like structures for their protective appeal.²¹ But even then they can be criticised for doing so – further proof that women's sense of self and their appearance are continuously patrolled from different ideological positions.²²

Thomson's deepening feminist analysis of contemporary society provided her with a clear understanding of the common social contracts and obligations that could have dissipated her professional focus. She accepted a modest lifestyle ahead of more commercial directions her work could have taken. Independently minded and not tied down domestic commitments, she travelled widely, and still does, having only recently returned from Vietnam. Previously, in the tradition of the Big OE, she not only explored Mexico and Europe but also the United States, Asia and Australia. Drawing all along the way and haunting art galleries wherever she went, she came to understand first-hand the interdependency of cultural change and artistic production. A variety of part-time jobs kept her financially afloat. In 1988, she landed a temporary teaching position at what was then the Christchurch Polytechnic School of Art and Design and it was her former tutor Graham Bennett who eventually helped her to secure permanent employment at the school. Print-making and drawing formed the mainstay of her teaching. Overall, Thomson experienced the studio team as a highly supportive additional professional network, and appreciated working alongside a "unified staff talking about teaching, sharing ideas and projects."²³ Thomson stayed most closely associated with the Applied Visual Arts stream, before retiring in early 2024. While not without its recurring challenges, Thomson enjoyed teaching, especially when "students really caught on" and in so doing challenged her to learn something new. This, in Thomson's words, is one of the often-overlooked benefits of teaching, namely the exploration of new media students may be interested in or finding new artist models.²⁴ She led their explorations by example and demonstrated the benefits of practice-based research through her consistent and often experimental use of graphic media.

Thomson has only ever worked full-time for two years and, as alluded to above, the 35 years she taught at the School were therefore highly productive in terms of her personal art practice as well. Rather than curtailing her creative output, the often collaborative projects instigated by her colleagues helped her build a consistent exhibition record at local and international venues. That said, by her own admission, Thomson has never been good at blowing her own trumpet. Therefore, a drawing prize she earned in 1984 in the former Yugoslavia and the Olivia Spencer Bower award in 1993 remain the only such entries in her artist's CV. Her stable employment also meant that in 1994 Thomson was able to buy a modest house in the central city, where the spare bedroom serves as her studio. She lives by Virginia Woolf's assertion that a woman not only needs an independent income, but also a "room of one's own," if she wants her creative practice to flourish.²⁵

Thomson's discussions with colleagues and students alike opened up new thematic directions in her work and she eventually turned her attention to the wider issue of the exploitation of power and trust in religious institutions. In *Tricks and Traps* (2007), held at Gallery 64zero3 in Christchurch, works like *Dirty Linen* (2006, screenprint on fabric) and *Evidence Singlets* (2007, screenprint, mixed media) confronted head-on the issue of child abuse in the Catholic church and the cover-ups that protect the perpetrators to this day. Appropriately, while still formally inventive, no element of satire or visual pun lightened the tone of this exhibition. In hindsight, it could be seen as a first indication that Thomson's work was beginning to take on a more serious note. This would have found the approval of Warren Feeney, who earlier commented that "Thomson is on far more secure ground when she evokes more seriously subtle emotions."²⁶ Overall, though, she has received very little critical or art historical attention. Her style, subject matter and preferred media have not widely resonated with local commentators, which is not an unusual response to art focused on social commentary. Another feature of her process, namely the amount of work and time Thomson devoted to thematic cycles, could easily disappoint audiences with shorter attention spans.

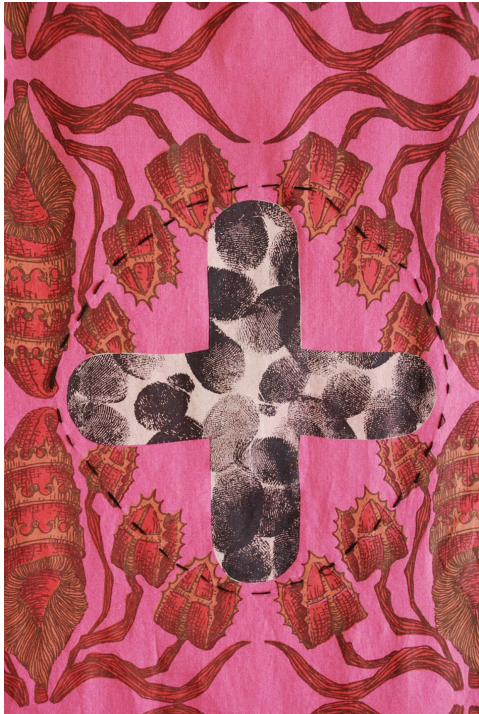


Figure 11. Sandra Thomson, *Dirty Linen*, 2006
(detail, screenprint on fabric).



Figure 12. Sandra Thomson, *Dirty Linen*, 2006
(detail, screenprint on fabric).

At times Thomson's choice of subject matter has taken on a prophetic aspect. Anticipating the Covid 19 pandemic by some five years, *Waiting* (2015) explored the intersection of spiritual beliefs, superstition and end-of-world scenarios. Referencing the Book of Revelations, and in particular The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, this suite of works featured long wallpaper drops covered in densely drawn signifiers of pending doom, such as mushroom clouds and the now all too familiar shapes of spikey viruses. Thomson has long been interested in the social function of apocalyptic narratives, which these days circulate most freely on the internet. According to Thomson,

Most societies share narratives of the cataclysmic destruction of the earth, the annihilation of evil and the creation of paradise. For the religious, this is seen as inevitable, meaningful and part of the divine plan. There is now a growing belief in a secular apocalypse. It is also seen as inevitable but for the secular the destruction is meaningless, there is no redemption and no hope.²⁷

And as we await (more and more anxiously, it seems) further threats to the existing world order and notions of human equality, much of Thomson's older work has become highly relevant again. It reminds us that social progress, can be easily undone, that we apparently do not learn from history and that one of art's essential and enduring functions, regardless of the social systems that produce it, is to reflect on what it means to be human.

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- 1 Sandra Thomson, personal communication, 12 September 2024. For additional information on all three exhibitions, see City Art Depot, <https://www.cityart.co.nz>.
- 2 Karen Joy Fowler, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (New York: Marian Wood Books, 2013).
- 3 "Far From Fiction," Colossal Laboratories & Biosciences, accessed 2 April 2025, <https://colossal.com/direwolf/>.
- 4 "10 Long-Lost Animals De-Extinction Scientists Are Attempting to Bring Back From The Grave," *DiscoverWildlife*, 5 March 2025, <https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/de-extinction-species>.
- 5 Thomson, personal communication, 11 November 2024.
- 6 Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982) 6.
- 7 Margaret A. Boden, "Creativity and Artificial Intelligence," *Artificial Intelligence* 103, nos. 1–2 (August 1998): 347.
- 8 Claudia Baxter, "Ai Art: The End of Creativity or a New Movement?" *BBC*, 22 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20241018-ai-art-the-end-of-creativity-or-a-new-movement>.
- 9 Thomson, personal communication, 30 January 2025.
- 10 Laurie Clarke, "When AI Can Make Art-What Does It Mean for Art?" *The Guardian*, 12 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/nov/12/when-ai-can-make-art-what-does-it-mean-for-creativity-dall-e-midjourney>.
- 11 Thomson's parents shared none of her creative interests. Her father was a grain merchant and her mother raised the three children. Thomson describes her brother Jim as the obviously artistically gifted one, but sadly he was killed in a motorcycle accident in Australia, aged only 22. Her surviving sibling is her sister Ruth, who eventually settled in Australia. Sandra Thomson, personal communication, 11 November 2024.
- 12 Thomson, personal communication, 11 November 2024.
- 13 Becker, *Art Worlds*.
- 14 Thomson, personal communication, 17 October 2024.
- 15 Thomson, personal communication, 11 November 2024.
- 16 Thomson, personal communication, 11 November 2024. While Thomson has a clear recollection of the article, it is not locatable in any digital archives.
- 17 Cassandra Fusco, "Impossible Postures: Sandra Thomson," *Craft Arts International*, no. 53 (2001): 35.
- 18 S Thomson, quoted in Fusco, "Impossible Postures", 35.
- 19 Fusco, "Impossible Postures: Sandra Thomson", 38.
- 20 At the time, Thomson immersed herself in medieval history in particular, and came across St Humility, a thirteenth-century Italian nun, who lived as a so-called anchoress or hermit in a closed-off cell for 12 years. Fusco, "Impossible Postures," 37.
- 21 Thomson, personal communication, 12 September 2024.
- 22 See Melis Mulazimoglu Erkal, "The Cultural History of the Corset and Gendered Body in Social and Literary Landscapes," *European Journal of Language and Literature Studies* 3, no. 3 (September–December 2017): 109–118, https://revistia.com/files/articles/ejls_v3_i3_17/Melis.pdf; Ellie V. Bramley, "Liberate Rather Than Repress: Why Corsets are Having a Fashion Moment," *The Guardian*, 1 March 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2024/mar/01/liberate-repress-corsets-bound-back-fashion>.
- 23 Thomson, personal communication, 17 October 2024. Denise Copland joined her in the printmaking studio on a part-time basis, while Cheryl Lucas taught drawing and ceramics. Michael Reed was responsible for 2-D design, illustration and printmaking. Bill Cummings, Bing Dawe, Randall Watson and Phil Aitken were mostly involved in 3-D and product design courses, while various other full and part-time staff members taught the academic components of the rapidly evolving programs of the school.
- 24 Thomson, personal communication, 17 October 2024.
- 25 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929). Thomson's 'room of her own' proved to be especially important after the Christchurch earthquakes, when many of her contemporaries lost their affordable studio spaces in the inner city and therefore their ability to keep on working.
- 26 Warren Feeney, "Supporting Roles," *The Press*, 11 September 1996, 12.